

# OPEN AND SHUT?

Wednesday, April 06, 2005

## To the benefit of scholarship: Interview with Dr. Alma Swan

**Co-founder and director of UK-based scholarly publishing consultancy Key Perspectives (KPL), Dr. Alma Swan has thought a lot about Open Access (OA). More importantly, she has conducted research on OA. Given the controversy surrounding the subject it is unsurprising that her research has attracted considerable interest from OA advocates, and some criticism from commercial publishers and opponents of OA.**

**In this first part of a two-part interview with Richard Poynder Alma discusses the survey findings. She also talks about frogs' gonads and biology "hotspots", and explains why she believes it was her former employer, Robert Maxwell, who was primarily responsible for transforming scholarly publishing from the tiny, rather gentlemanly industry it was, into the highly efficient generator of profits it is today.**



**RP:** Can you say something about your background? I believe you initially worked as a researcher and lecturer in cell biology?

**AS:** Right. My research was on cell adhesion and motility, specifically on the control of these things. My PhD research was on intercellular adhesion in slime moulds, which is very useful for bringing tedious small talk to a halt at cocktail parties.

**RP:** OK, you've got my attention. Can you expand on this?

**AS:** Well, when I moved on to postdoc work we used a wonderful model system for cancer metastasis. Certain cells in the frog embryo that are destined to form the germ cells — the eggs and sperm — migrate through other embryonic tissues at a certain stage of development until they reach the primordial gonads, at which point they stop migrating, settle down and divide, just like tumour cells that metastasise from the primary tumour.

We were looking at what controls and directs the migration and then the cessation of that motile phase in the hope of understanding more about cancer. Latterly I worked on aspects of tumour immunology too. It was all fascinating stuff!

**RP:** So why abandon it?

**AS:** For several reasons. I wasn't suited to the reductionist approach of research and I wasn't good at it. I'm better at big picture stuff, and at taking loads of detail and distilling the essential messages from the mass. Also, I didn't like certain aspects of academic life. I loved teaching and the students, though, and I have continued with that to this day in certain capacities, though it's business studies I teach now rather than biology.

**RP:** Why was it publishing that you fled to, and why Robert Maxwell's Pergamon Press, which you joined in 1985?

**AS:** I got into publishing because I was on the editorial board of the Pergamon database Current Awareness in Biological Sciences (CABS) and I was offered the job of managing editor. It was a major change of direction but one I certainly don't regret at all. That said, biology remains a great love for me.

**RP:** Why? What's so compelling about frogs' gonads compared, say, to the big questions that physicists are allowed to ask?

**AS:** Sure, physicists and mathematicians will tell you they ask the more fundamental

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For the historians of open access: A complete archive of the discussions that took place between 1998 and 2010 over how to provide OA to the peer-reviewed research literature online is available here: [ecs.soton.ac.uk/~harnad/Hyperm...](https://ecs.soton.ac.uk/~harnad/Hyperm...)

2h



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questions in natural science, but I have always been more drawn to the questions in biology. And nowadays these are even more fascinating. Look at some of the hotspots in biology now for instance?

**RP:** *Genomics?*

**AS:** Yes, genomics. But look also at what's happening in pharmacology, particularly neuroscience; look at virology, aging, systems biology. Biology is still the 'wow' subject as far as I'm concerned.

And the really exciting thing is that the reductionism that has characterised science for two centuries is giving way to a new integrational approach. Systems biology is a perfect example of this. And just wait until the theoretical physicists get hold of some of molecular biology's current questions! It's hard to sit still when you think about the exciting things to come in the next decade or two.

**RP:** *But you settled on scholarly publishing; moreover, not primary journals but indexing services?*

**AS:** Yes, I was in what people refer to as secondary publishing. It was great for me because all the issues of all the life science and medical journals that matter came through our offices each month. For a natural synthesiser, nothing could be more satisfying.

**RP:** *What became of CABS?*

**AS:** The database still exists and is part of Elsevier's secondary publishing services. It was moved to Amsterdam in a restructuring exercise in 1996 and renamed Biobase. CABS was pioneering in its time, thanks to its founding editor, and to Robert Maxwell.

**RP:** *Pergamon was acquired by Elsevier in 1991. What changed when Elsevier took over?*

**AS:** The family firm thing went out of the window, and in its place came a shareholder-focused enterprise. In terms of company culture, an autocracy was replaced by something very different. There was some reorganisation almost immediately as Mike Boswood (the CEO) got things as he wanted them and then we all settled down to living under a different regime. From my personal point of view it was a time of great development and satisfaction.

**RP:** *Maxwell was a controversial figure. But what was his legacy to the scholarly publishing business in your view?*

**AS:** Maxwell created a thriving publishing company which had some spectacularly successful products in its list. It also had a unique position in terms of academic relations. By the way, I'm talking about relations with academics here, not with librarians. They would have another story to tell you.

**RP:** *What was special about the relationship with academics?*

**AS:** Right from the start Maxwell understood very clearly the value of researchers to a scholarly publishing enterprise. He put great effort into establishing connections and relationships with distinguished, key people and in keeping them involved. The downside of his legacy was that we once had a splendid pension scheme with some money in it, and then suddenly we didn't!

**RP:** *These days Elsevier is viewed as the "bad boy" of scholarly publishing, but you personally believe Maxwell was responsible for many of the major changes in the industry? Is that right?*

**AS:** Yes, but you imply Maxwell was a "bad boy" too. In certain ways he was, but he was much more than that.

**RP:** *How do you mean?*

**AS:** How long have we got here? Until Maxwell began Pergamon Press, scholarly publishing was a tiny and rather gentlemanly industry. Maxwell saw its potential for growth and profits and exploited that potential. There has been anguish for librarians ever since. He was even then a figure of hate for his price-gouging, profit-maximising ways, and for those who worked for him this meant taking the flak from librarians all the time; but there was another side to all this.

**RP:** *Are you going to tell me he was really a good guy?*

**AS:** I'm not going to tell you he was cuddly, but he was a man of great creativity and drive. You never knew what he was going to suggest next. There was a department

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at Pergamon called 'Special Projects' which really meant 'Mr Maxwell's pet ideas'. Some of the things that they had to tackle were hilariously eccentric and destined for failure, but many were extremely successful, respected around the world, and made great contributions to scholarship.

And this suck-it-and-see culture pervaded the whole company to some extent. Life at Pergamon was never dull, whatever the tribulations that came with it. If you move around the industry today you'll find lots of people who were there at the time and who still beam at the memories. Wherever two are gathered together, the reminiscences will start.

**RP:** *Can you give me some examples of his innovations?*

**AS:** In terms of conventional scholarly publishing Pergamon published a great many highly-acclaimed reference works and multi-volume encyclopaedias, and was well-known for doing so. Maxwell was personally involved with some of them.

There were also some extremely good titles on Pergamon's booklist, both specialist titles aimed at the market for researchers, and textbooks; and again Maxwell had a hand in commissioning some of them. Pergamon's flagship journals such as *Tetrahedron*, *Tetrahedron Letters* and what is generally called 'The Red Journal' (*Journal of Radiation Oncology, Biology, Physics*) were — and still are — outstanding in their field.

**RP:** *He was also an early pioneer in electronic publishing I believe?*

**AS:** He was; he saw the 'information revolution' on the horizon very early and invested hugely in electronic publishing initiatives, of which our CABS database was one.

He also started a company called Pergamon InfoLine, which hosted dozens of databases in business, technology and science. And one senior figure in the information science world of today — [Charles Oppenheim](#) — cut his teeth there in the early 80s.

**RP:** *You left Pergamon in 1996 to establish KPL. Why?*

**AS:** I decided it was time to do something different and to take the plunge and see if I could run my own professional life. In fact, I immediately teamed up with Sheridan Brown, who was taking the same decision at the same time. I had worked with Sheridan for some time a few years earlier, and I knew he was an incredible person in many ways. Leaving a settled career in a large company is always risky for all sorts of reasons, but it's worked for us. We're just completing our ninth year in business.

**RP:** *What does KPL do?*

**AS:** KPL carries out consultancy work across a range of publishing-related issues, mainly — but not exclusively — for scholarly publishers. We've deliberately stayed as a two-person operation, though we do contract people in on some jobs when we need extra manpower. We like the fact that we remain close to all the clients, we personally attend to the work they want done, and we build up lasting professional relationships with most of them.

**RP:** *Can you give me an example of some of the clients you do work for?*

**AS:** It would be unprofessional to list them but we have around 50 clients today. More than half of them are repeat clients who have come back to us with more projects over the years; and we have one client for whom we are doing the ninth major project.

But we also have some who have only used us once: an example is the [Competition Commission](#). When there was a proposed merger in the industry that looked as if it might constitute a monopoly situation they called us in to advise and help them analyse the market. The [European Commission's Merger Task Force](#) asked us to help in the same way.

We do jobs that range from that sort of market analysis through new product development, business planning, strategic planning, market research, and investment appraisals.

**RP:** *How did you get involved with the Open Access (OA) movement, and why?*

**AS:** We were selected to carry out a survey for [JISC/OSI](#) on OA journals. It was just another job at the time. We weren't trying to 'get involved' with OA. We had already carried out some studies for publishers where OA was part of the story, including one that we did for [ALPSP](#) (the Association of Learned & Professional Society



**Open Access:**  
What should  
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#### Followers

Publishers) on electronic publishing, which report is in the public domain. However, the JISC/OSI contract was the first we had that was specifically on OA.

**RP:** *As a result of this work, however, KPL is now seen to be an expert on OA matters?*

**AS:** Certainly since then almost every research job we've taken on has addressed OA at least in part — because publishers are very exercised by it. But we're only considered to be "involved" with the OA movement because of the public reports that we have published on the topic.

The fact is that these reports are just a tiny fraction of our output, and the bulk of our work is client-confidential and so unknown to a wider audience. In reality, we are involved with a lot of other topics and themes around scholarly communication as well.

**RP:** *The public reports on OA you refer to are based on **two surveys** you conducted into researcher's attitudes to Open Access?*

**AS:** Yes, we've done two surveys, plus a big study for JISC in which we were asked to develop a model for a national eprints service.

**RP:** *What were the main findings of the OA surveys?*

**AS:** The first survey was on authors who had published in OA journals. This showed that the principle of Open Access is a very strong motivator and that the majority of people who have already done so will continue to publish their work in OA journals.

The survey also identified the main concerns that authors have about OA, including quality control, IPR and copyright issues, and fears that it would threaten the publishing status quo, particularly the publishing activities of learned societies. These, by the way, are all baseless concerns when examined carefully in the light of evidence.

**RP:** *And the second survey?*

**AS:** The second survey was on self-archiving. As you know there are two ways of practising OA: the so-called Gold Road, in which researchers publish in OA journals, and the Green Road, where researchers continue publishing in traditional subscription-based journals but then self-archive the papers — either in a central subject-based repository or an institutional archive.

So our second survey looked at the alternative — green — solution. It was carried out specifically as a follow-up to the study on OA journals, because we wanted to establish the state of play for both methods of OA provision. This second study is not yet published: I'm just finishing the report.

**RP:** *Can you say what its main findings are?*

**AS:** That self-archiving is a growing activity, that there is still a considerable level of ignorance about it as a means for researchers to provide OA without having to change publishing habits and preferences, that it takes very little time to do, and that the vast majority of authors have no objections in principle to being required to self-archive by their employer or funder.

**RP:** *What do we learn from this?*

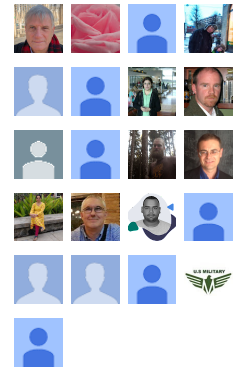
**AS:** We learn that there are no significant philosophical or logical barriers to providing OA by self-archiving, but there remains a very significant issue to do with awareness, and this has big advocacy implications.

**RP:** *Anthony Watkinson, who also works as a scholarly publishing consultant, and is one of the founding directors of the publishing research group CIBER, recently publicly challenged the authority of your OA surveys, arguing that the sample sizes were too small.*

**AS:** Anthony dismissed our work with the phrase "KPL's surveys are well-known but are based on small numbers". In fact, we have only published the results of one survey so far. That was indeed based on small numbers, but it was a valid approach and that's why I defended it in the public discussion forum which Anthony chose for his commentary. So, yes, there are people — Anthony is obviously one of them but there are others — who go round condemning this work because of the small sample.

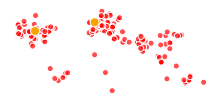
**RP:** *People who disagree with the results of research findings will often challenge their validity, but how clear a picture do you think your survey gave of the true state of affairs?*

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**AS:** OK, let's lay this ghost, shall we? For the survey in question the client asked us to survey 100 authors who had published in OA journals. When you're in the consulting business the one thing you always make sure you do is what the client asks you to do, so the methodology was set out for us. In the event, I think we actually included some 150 authors who had published in OA journals, plus the same number who had not, for comparison.

My defence of the methodology was that if you take a proper sample from the whole population, then the result should be statistically valid. If we had selected in this case, say, authors who were from Harvard or Oxford and then asked them questions about how easy they found it to pay a publication fee to an OA journal, then we should have been quite rightly criticised. As it was, we had a random sample with no bias, save the self-selection response bias inherent in all surveys.

**RP:** *So it was a valid sample?*

**AS:** Absolutely. It was a valid sample from a population which is, after all, not that big itself. I would add that for each job we do we take advice from a statistician before we proceed.

Just to ram my point home, if you compare the findings we obtained for that small sample with those for similar questions in our present survey (which has 1,296 respondents) and the big [CIBER Group survey \[PDF\]](#), which had thousands of respondents, then you'll find they match up very well. As such it should send out a perfectly clear signal about the state of affairs with respect to OA publishing as of the beginning of 2004.

**RP:** *Shortly after Anthony Watkinson criticised your sample sizes Cliff Morgan, of Wiley, publicly questioned your objectivity?*

**AS:** Yes, then Cliff Morgan piled into the fray! Great fun, although I was bit taken aback at his intervention because we were just that week finishing writing up a survey-based study — not on OA, I should add — for which Cliff was one of the commissioning team! But yes, he claimed our latest OA survey 'led' the respondents.

**RP:** *Which you deny?*

**AS:** I certainly do. As I pointed out, we asked only questions that required respondents to tell us about their experiences, not their attitudes — except for the very last question of all, which was the only one that asked about an intention. Now it's perfectly possible that respondents will blatantly lie about their experiences, I suppose, but why should we assume they will when there is no conceivable personal advantage in doing so?

**RP:** *I guess this just shows how contentious an issue OA has become?*

**AS:** Yes, and so it is to be expected. Moreover, Anthony and Cliff are both seasoned and thoughtful industry characters whose job it is to question things that throw up data they might not welcome. I don't mind a bit of rough-and-tumble in public with them — especially when I'm right and can refute the allegations easily! There will always be flaws in my work — whose work is perfect? But in this case they picked on the wrong things. Now they'll probably go back and look for the real flaws, so I doubt we have heard the last of this!

**RP:** *Much of this criticism appears to flow from a feeling that you have "gone native" over OA. I'd be interested, therefore, in your personal views. For example, is Open Access — to quote OA advocate [Stevan Harnad](#) — simply "optimal and inevitable", and thus a natural development of scholarly communication? If not, is there a sufficiently strong "social good" case for making publicly-funded research freely available that it has to be "made to happen"?*

**AS:** OK, let's first address the 'going native' claim. What a thought! Our role is to collect data, analyse them and report on them. What we've done on OA so far is to collect data specifically on author/researcher experiences of OA journals and self-archiving, analysed them, and then reported them, factually. If the data add up to a burgeoning OA scene then that's a matter of fact, not of me going native or becoming unobjective or opinionated.

**RP:** *So you have no personal views on OA?*

**AS:** You should know by now, Richard, that consultants don't have personal views! But just this once, here are some views, for what they're worth, on that phrase of Stevan's. Yes, he uses "optimal and inevitable" frequently, and it's economical yet all-encompassing and exactly fits the bill.

No one with the good of scholarship at heart can possibly argue with the first of these

things — that OA is optimal. All of society should have the good of scholarship at heart. It is a fundament of civilisation, and I want it to proceed as unhindered and untrammelled as possible. OA is entirely to the benefit of scholarship, so of course I personally view OA as optimal.

**RP:** *And inevitable?*

**AS:** Yes, that too — given time — because it's so obviously what is needed. It is optimal, and it will come to pass.

*In the **second part** of this interview Alma Swan discusses whether OA poses any threat to traditional subscription-based journals and secondary publishers, and explains how she believes scholarly publishing — and publishers — will evolve in the future. She also talks about copyright and peer review, and outlines what she thinks governments and research funders should be doing about OA.*

*If you would like to comment on this interview please e-mail your views to me at **richard.poynder@journalist.co.uk**, or to comment publicly hit the comment button below.*

Posted by Richard Poynder at **09:16**



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